Marijane Osborn*

Approaching Africa with Orosius on the Northumbrian Franks Casket: Conceptual Models for the Casket's Construction

Abstract: Three of the Franks Casket's five carved panels contain scenes from stories in Latin – from the Gospel of Matthew on the front, Virgil's *Aeneid* on the left side, and Josephus's *Jewish Wars* (via Pseudo-Hegesippus) on the back. *Approaching Africa* argues that, in addition to these pictures referring to written texts, a fourth Latin text lies behind the casket's plan, Orosius's *Historiarum Adversus Paganos Libri Septem* ('Seven Books of History Against the Pagans'). This is a new discovery about this ever-fascinating box. The subjects on the casket's two sides and back suggest a plan based on the three-continents concept of the *ecumene* described by Orosius in Book I, while a clockwise 'journey' around the back aligns references to place with a later passage by Orosius as modified by a passage from Bede. An Orosian arc of dates then emerges, with all three devices pointing toward 'Africa' on the casket's right side. Unlike the places named on the left side and back, however, that on the casket's right side is left unnamed as a riddle to be solved. Reading that right-side panel as thematically paired with the Virgilian left-side panel may help to solve it.

Key terms: Franks Casket, Orosius, T-O map, Carthage, horse, She-wolf

*Corresponding author: Marijane Osborn, UC Davis
E-Mail: mjosborn@ucdavis.edu

Introduction to the Franks Casket

The Franks Casket is an extraordinary artefact, a small (nine inches long) box with panels made from the bone of a whale – from *hronæs ban*, as the casket tells us – and carved in relief. The narrative scenes carved on the casket's four sides and lid are accompanied by brief texts and labels in prose and verse, mostly in runes, some coded. The language and letter-forms of these inscriptions suggest an origin for the casket in the first half of the eighth century in northern England, probably Northumbria (Waxenberger 2023).[1] Except for the right-side panel now in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence,[2] the casket is owned by the British Museum, and the museum website describes the casket's six illustrations as "scenes from Roman, Jewish, Christian and Germanic tradition" ("Casket" n.d.). Agreeing with Leslie Webster that these scenes are thematically paired, this essay introduces a new interpretation of the casket emphasising the designer's use of Latin sources and associated concepts to expand the casket's themes both geographically and temporally. After introducing the casket's five panels along with Webster's thesis about their pairing and then showing how the 'Virgilian' illustration on the casket's left-side panel demonstrates the designer's close attention to a Latin text, the essay proceeds in three semi-independent parts, arguing that the following structures derive from Orosius: the plan, the periplus, and an arc of dates (all three launching the astute reader toward Africa but none arriving). This is the first time that material from Orosius has been introduced as a significant contribution to the creation of the Franks Casket.[3] A

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1 The dimensions of the Franks Casket are 22.9 x 19 x 10.9 cm. The British Museum named the casket after its donor, Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, rather than for the place of its mid-nineteenth-century discovery (Auzon in France), as would be more usual. The best introduction to the Franks Casket is a slim, lavishly-illustrated museum booklet in which Leslie Webster (2012a: 5–6) summarizes the casket's provenance and construction (11–15) and discusses how late classical artefacts such as the Italian Brescia Casket have influenced its design (31–32). For the design itself, Webster draws heavily on her ground-breaking article, "The Iconographic Programme of the Franks Casket" (Webster 1999). In a careful study of its rune-forms, Gaby Waxenberger (2023: 295) locates the casket in Northumbria in "the earlier decades of the 8th century". Ian Wood (1990: 1) suggests it is "datable to the first half or middle of the eighth century".

2 The right-side panel of the casket, which became detached from the rest, is of special importance to this article. See Pàroli (1997) for the modern history of this panel, which is called by various names reflecting that history.

3 Katherine Cross appears to be the only scholar who has previously considered Orosius in connection with the casket in any significant way, mentioning him primarily to support her argument (following Webster) that even the casket's panels that appear to be secular may be interpreted as thematically 'Christian': "The inclusion of the [Titus] scene on the Franks Casket accorded with Orosius's view of Rome's role in Christian history, in much the same way as did the Romulus and Remus panel" (Cross 2015: 19). The present article emphasizes the temporal and geographical aspects of the Orosian material.

fourth part demonstrates how the two side panels with She-wolf and horse may be interpreted as iconic emblems of the two famously confronting cities, Rome and Carthage, and the argument concludes with thoughts about the casket's missing city name, while respecting the designer's possible choice to make this discovery difficult or even impossible for the uninitiated.

Although more than one person must have been involved in the casket's conception, design, construction, and carving, each element requiring a different skill set, here those persons or team will be referred to in the singular as the casket's designer, and in the masculine because that is the most likely gender of someone familiar with major Latin texts in that period.[4] In any case, the casket's complexly interlocking allusions reveal that behind the casket's project was the mind of one passionately engaged person. While this reading of the casket focuses on Latin texts, the casket's images presented below enable a reader to see how the designer translates the verbal descriptions of those texts into graphic expression.[5] The main point of this display, however, is to show how images and text work together to reveal larger conceptual models of arrangement almost certainly derived from Orosius.

1 Thematically Paired Sides

In her groundbreaking article, "The Iconographic Programme of the Franks Casket", Leslie Webster (1999) shows how all five panels appear to work together to display a coherent and carefully arranged programme. In her more recent British Museum publication, Webster interprets this design as a series of three pairs crossing over the casket, "in which each pair compares a theme associated with Christian tradition with one drawn from a pagan Germanic one, each illuminating the other" (Webster 2012a: 33). This method of discovery would be familiar to Christian intellectuals of the time, both lay and clerical, who were trained to discover meaningful correspondences between paired episodes in the Old and New Testaments. The Northumbrian monk Bede (673–735) gives the example of a painting in his own

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4 Women competent in Latin were busy in this period, but until later they were few in comparison to the men; see Lendinara (1986: 270–271). Therefore, it is probable that the casket's designer was male, but this should not be taken as certain.

5 For the present purpose, Wilhelm Viëtor's (1901) photographs are adequate and reproduce well. The British Museum's photographs of the casket are available both on the museum website ("Casket" n.d.) and on the Babelstone website ("Runic Text on the Franks Casket" n.d.), which shows the casket's individual panels with their inscriptions individually displayed and analysed. Martin Foys's digital edition of the casket ("Franks Casket: a Digital Edition" n.d.) includes a wealth of information along with photographs of the carved panels.

monastery showing Isaac carrying the wood with which he was to be burned (Genesis 22) and Jesus carrying the cross on which he was to suffer, "one image over the other" (Grocock and Wood 2013: 45); the viewer was expected to make the connection. Webster's interpretation of the Franks Casket pairs as being deeply infused with Christian and ethical meanings may give one pause, because the only definitely Christian scene on the casket is that of the Magi on the front. Doubt about the religious interpretation does not compromise the discernible fact of a contrapuntal design, however; that the casket's scenes are intentionally paired now seems obvious. The scenes on the five panels are as follows:
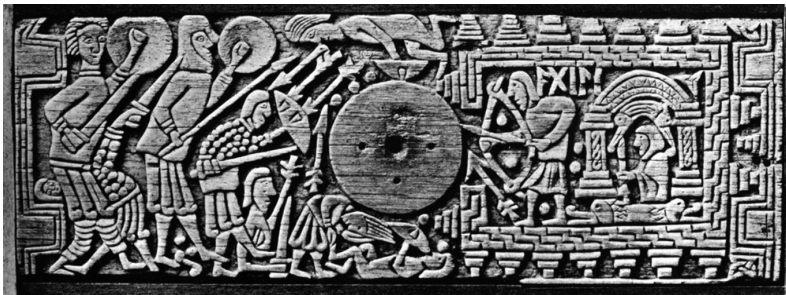
The Lid

Figure 1: The lid of the Franks Casket, showing a city attacked by a group of warriors and defended by an archer, with a woman (?) behind him in a regal pose under an arch. Photo: Wilhelm Viëtor (1901). Public Domain.

The **lid** shows a group of warriors attacking a building within which a single archer defends a figure, usually identified as a woman, sitting within a structure, perhaps a shrine. A label reading *Ægili* in runes identifies either the archer or the scene. The word has been variously interpreted and translated, for example as the names Egil, Achilles, and Ægele (of *Ægeles þrep,* modern Ailsford). The interpretation of the scene most often cited identifies the archer as Weland's brother Egil in an unknown episode of the story of the semi-magical smith,[6] but no interpretation has met with

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6 Despite Egil's long-canonized identity here, this is probably not the archer of the Scandinavian versions of Weland's story, as Egil seems to have been added to the story centuries after the making of the Franks Casket. Moreover, the carver appears to refer to different narratives in each panel, which makes their cross-over themes all the more intriguing. James Lang points out the similarities of structures on the casket's front, lid, and back, and how even the positions within each panel of the women on the front and lid resemble each other: the structure on the lid "lies to the right, as indeed does

universal acceptance.[7] As for the thematic pairing, the lid shows a city besieged and the back shows a city conquered.

The Front Panel

Figure 2: The front panel of the Franks Casket, showing the smith Weland on the left and the Magi on the right. These scenes are framed together by a two-line poem (with a tag) in runes about the whale of whose bone the casket is made. Photo: Wilhelm Viëtor (1901). Public Domain.

Mary's canopy. The arched structure similarly encloses a woman, a reminder of Mary below her canopy" (1999: 248). It may also be significant that each of these two figures is represented by a torso, not a full body representation (noted by Cross 2015: 30), giving them an icon-like appearance. The apotropaic motif of yoked beast heads (Webster 2003: 18) above and below the woman in her shrine may add to the warning against theft of the casket's contents implied by the archer holding off attack.

7 Gabriele Cocco (2009: 20–29) collected every suggestion about the lid that he could discover, an astonishing array that he carefully describes and lists with sources, concluding with his own argument that the image on the lid represents the scene in 2 Kings 13:17 where the prophet Elisha (as the figure under the arch) commands King Joab to shoot a symbolic arrow. Jill Fitzgerald (2024: 379) argues that the label *Ægili* refers primarily to Egil of Fulda, but she observes that "[t]he lid, with its complex multilayered mode of visual storytelling [...] can evoke meaning on multiple registers at once", and Jan-Peer Hartmann and Andrew James Johnston (2024) adroitly revive Achilles in an argument for reading the casket as a complex of temporalities. Both articles thus agree that multiple meanings are combined here, and both arguments are learned and carefully constructed while coming to very different conclusions – a reminder of how much must be speculation about this panel having the label as its only inscription. There is a general consensus that, whatever event is being portrayed, the scene with the protective archer functions as a warning against theft of the casket's contents. No one has noticed how Aldhelm evokes imagery like that on the lid in his simile for Archbishop Theodore being beset by his rambunctious Irish students, "just as the warlike bowman in the midst of battle is hemmed in by a dense formation of enemy legions". But Aldhelm's teacher-archer powerfully draws his bow and shoots arrows from the quiver of "the obscure and acute syllogisms of chronography" until their shield-wall is broken and they flee (Aldhelm's "Letter to Heahfrith", qtd. in Lapidge and Herren 1979: 163).

The **front panel** of the casket contains two contrasting but thematically paired scenes, with the famous craftsman Weland on the left and the Magi bearing gifts on the right. These scenes with their runic inscription are perhaps intended to teach the viewer how to read the rest of the box. Because this linking is complicated and interesting, this introduction will receive more extended attention than the other panels. The Weland and Magi scenes are surrounded by a poem in runes with the tag or gloss *hronæsban* 'whale's bone'. This is the poem transliterated into our alphabet: *Fisc flodu ahof on fergenberig | warþ gasric grorn þær he on greut giswom* 'A "flood" [tidal surge?] lifted the fish [i.e., whale] onto a high "berg" [sand dune?]. Ga:sric [the whale] became sad when he swam onto the sand'. This alliterative poem about the stranding of a whale whose bone became the box apparently has nothing to do with these two scenes carved on the box. But unlike the letters of our alphabet, all the runes have traditional names, and once we know this, we see that the first line of the poem alliterates on f (the rune named *feoh* 'wealth') and the second line alliterates on g (the rune named *gifu* 'gift'). Thus, the poem's alliterating runes, first the f-runes then the g-runes, serve as glosses on the two scenes, where the magical smith is creating 'wealth' and the Magi bring their 'gifts' (see Becker 1973: 305–306).[8] Since other panels imply readers familiar with Latin texts, the label MAGI above these familiar New Testament gift-bearers is not to identify them; perhaps it is intended to call our attention to the fact that they are "magicians" like Weland, further demanding that we consider the two scenes together.

The scene on the left side of the panel illustrates the Vengeance of Weland, a story referred to in the later Old English poem *Deor* and known from the much later Old Norse Eddic poem *Völundarkviða* (see Dronke 1997; see also Pettit 2023, who presents the poem online). The legendary craftsman has been captured and lamed by King Niðhad and ordered to create wealth for his coffers. Weland is in his smithy, holding out a cup in his tongs to Beaduhild, the king's daughter, whom the smith plans to get drunk and impregnate. The cup, which we may imagine covered in gold ('wealth'), is made from the skull of the king's son whose decapitated body lies below, unseen by Beaduhild. In a small adjacent scene a man (Weland himself?) strangles geese from whose wings the smith will create a flying machine with which to escape the king's certain wrath for slaying his son and impregnating his daughter. The scene on the right side of the panel shows the Adoration of the Magi as they approach the Virgin and Child bearing their traditional gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. But a goose leads them toward Christ, a feature present in no

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8 Another apparently intentional feature in the inscription, similar in kind, is the number of the runes, seventy-two, which is the traditional number of nations and languages of the world (Sauer 1983; Sauer 1989). This medieval topos aligns with the geographical theme of the casket.

other known version of the scene (Kehrer 1908, qtd. in Osborn 1991: 252, fn. 11). James Lang (1999: 248) suggests that the bird has escaped the scene of Weland's strangling to fly over into the adjacent scene to be 'saved'. The two illustrations show contrasting attitudes toward virgins, young boys, and birds, and, according to Richard Abels (2009: 567), valid responses to the contrasting good and bad kings represented by Christ and Niðhad, even though King Niðhad is not shown – and nor is Herod, who, in ordering the 'Massacre of the Innocents', will attempt to kill Christ. Sigmund Oehrl (2021), focusing on that massacre, discusses how what is known but not seen in the illustrations on this panel plays into the cross-over themes between the two stories. The three remaining panels may now be described more briefly.

The Back Panel

Figure 3: The back panel of the Franks Casket, illustrating Titus's conquering Jerusalem in 70 CE. Photo: Wilhelm Viëtor (1901). Public Domain.

On the **back panel**, Titus reconquers Jerusalem from the insurrection of rebellious Jews in CE 70. As the inscription indicates, he fights Jews or "a Jew" in the scene at top left, and the inhabitants flee Jerusalem at top right, with naked children being helped to flee over the roof of the building that represents the great temple. Two further panels below show a Roman sitting in judgment at left (in a scene labelled in runes DOM 'judgement') and a captive (labelled GISL 'hostage') being led off at right, perhaps condemned to slavery. The source of this historical event is Josephus's *Bellum judaicum* (*The Jewish Wars*). Access in early medieval England to this work would have been through a heavily altered translation into Latin by the anonymous writer known as 'Pseudo-Hegesippus' (see Bay 2025; Lapidge 2006: 40, 164,

317).[9] Dustin McKinley Frazier (2010) proposes that the small DOM vignette at bottom left illustrates Josephus's story of a Jewish boy who outwits the Roman conquerors to get water for his thirsty companions. In judging him, the Romans surprisingly praise him for his cleverness and loyalty.[10] This panel, emphasising the conquest of a city, is thematically paired with the city besieged on the lid, as noted above.

The Left-Side Panel

Figure 4: The left-side panel of the Franks Casket illustrating the twins Romulus and Remus suckled by the She-wolf in a leafy outdoor scene. Photo: Wilhelm Viëtor (1901). Public Domain.

On the **left-side panel**, in a pose strikingly different from the arched wolf above the twins seen on 'Urbs Roma' coins (see Figure 9 below), the She-wolf of Rome lies recumbent at bottom centre of the scene, nurturing the twins Romulus and Remus with her life-giving milk. Another wolf hovers above and two pairs of warriors with spears kneel (or creep up) on either side.[11] Pairs are thematic on this panel about

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9 Steven H. Wander (2024: 102–110) offers an excellent and thorough discussion of the Titus panel in his book *Flavius Josephus*. He cites Leopold Peeters's (1996: 36) identification of the DOM illustration in the lower register of the panel as the trial of James the Just, but he suggests that the meeting between Vespasian and Josephus might be a better fit: "A prominent episode in the *Bellum judaicum* and perhaps the most famous encounter between a Flavian ruler and a prisoner" (Wander 2024: 103).
10 A translation of the Jewish boy passage in the Pseudo-Hegesippus Latin translation of Josephus may be read on the Preterist Archives website ("Hegesippus: On The Ruin of the City of Jerusalem" 2005).
11 See Mazzoni (2010) for a comprehensive study of the iconic She-wolf.

twins. The She-wolf and boys are shown lying down in her den as if seen from above, while the second wolf and warriors are portrayed vertically. The scene is framed by a description in runes identifying the scene (though with a peculiar spelling of the boys' names): "Romwarus and Remwarus, two brothers, a she-wolf fed them in Rome city, far from their native land". This panel will be examined in Section 2 below.

The Right-Side Panel

Figure 5: The panel on the right side of the Franks Casket, featuring a horse at the centre, shows a three-part sequence of images usually thought to illustrate either the death of the hero Sigurd or a lost Germanic story; other suggestions have been proposed. Photo: Wilhelm Viëtor (1901). Public Domain.

In the central scene of the **right-side panel,** a horse coming through a wood (labelled *wudu* beneath the animal's feet) faces a cloaked person with staff and goblet; they stand above an inhabited grave mound. The left and right scenes bracketing this central scene echo the *dom* and *gisl* scenes on the back, with a possibly masked horse-headed man sitting in the judicial 'Osiris pose' (Henry 1974: 190–191) in the scene on the left (cp. DOM), and a cloaked figure constrained by two others in the scene on the right (cp. GISL). The series is framed by a mysterious three-line poem in runes, with multiple meanings made possible by the device of coded vowel runes. This translation is from Martin Foys's website ("Franks Casket: a digital edition" n.d.), broken here into the three lines of verse indicated by alliteration in the original:

> Here 'Hos' sits on the sorrow-mound;
> distress (she) suffers as on her 'Ertae' had imposed:
> a painful den of sorrows, and of troubles of the heart.

This interpretation of the runes is based on that by Napier (1901: 373), but there are many interpretations of this scene and its inscription and they continue to proliferate. The earliest interpretation, still popular, reads the first six runes as *her ho[r]s* 'here the ho[r]se', instead of recording an otherwise unknown name Hos, and interprets the three scenes as referring to the death of Sigurd, with his horse Grani mourning over his master within the grave in the central scene ("Notes and News" 1890: 90; Elliott 1959: 106–108). A different reading of the first six runes, transcribed *herh-os*, interprets that word as 'temple deity' and refers the term to the horse-headed figure at left (Davidson 1969: 223; see Foys's website for further examples ["Franks Casket: a digital edition" n.d.]). In any identification of this scene, its thematic contrast with the life-giving scene on the casket's left-side panel is supported by several paired and contrasting images (animals, dens, drink, woods). A closer look at that left-side panel now follows, emphasising its literary source.

2 Visualizing a Virgilian Ekphrasis: The Recumbent She-wolf

The text for this section is Virgil's *Aeneid* 8.630–634:

> Fecerat et viridi fetam Mavortis in antro
> procubuisse lupam, geminos huic ubera circum
> ludere pendentis pueros et lambere matrem
> impavidos, illam tereti cervice reflexa
> mulcere alternos et corpora fingere lingua. (*Aeneid* 8.630–634)

> [Vulcan] had made, too, a mother wolf stretched out in the green cave of Mars with twin boys playing round her udders, hanging there unafraid and sucking at her as she bent back her supple neck to lick each of them in turn and mould their bodies into shape with her tongue.[12]

Behind the Titus scene on the casket's back panel lies Josephus's *Jewish Wars* (as mentioned above), demonstrating that the designer had access to some well-known Latin texts or compilations. There on the back and on this left-side panel, the casket's designer is creating pictures based on stories known in Northumbria from written

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12 The *Aeneid* is quoted from Pharr (1964, books 1–6, with change of consonant *u* to *v*.) and Gransden (2008, book 8). Translations are from West (2003). Virgil alludes here to a common idea, usually associated with bears, that the mother animal actually licks the lumpish infant cub into its appropriate shape. Ovid makes the same observation some decades later in *Fasti* 2.418, about the She-wolf licking the twins in order to form their shapes. Cristina Mazzoni tells how this licking process was associated with Virgil himself in ancient texts. According to the *Vita Donatiana,* for example, "Virgil produced verses the way a she-bear produces cubs, shapeless and formless. Only later did he shape and form them into publishable lines" (qtd. in Mazzoni 2010: 106; see also 110–112).

sources and describing them in the surrounding inscription. But the She-wolf scene is best known from coins, and it was not until 1999 that the *literary* source of the subject was recognised. In that year, two different scholars, George Henderson and Carol Neuman de Vegvar, noticed that the Romulus and Remus panel on the left side of the Franks Casket seemed to refer to a panel on the Shield of Aeneas, an imaginary artefact invented by Virgil in Book 8 of the *Aeneid.* This source for the illustration of that nurturing She-wolf, largely unnoticed since its discovery,[13] is important to the present argument because it displays the casket's designer's interest in stories derived directly from Latin sources. In the familiar depiction of the She-wolf suckling the twins on 'Roma' coins, the wolf stands stiffly arched above the two babies, who reach up for her teats.[14] But the left-side panel of the Franks Casket is utterly different, showing the She-wolf nurturing the twins in an outdoor scene where she lies more naturally recumbent and at ease, as described by Virgil. George Henderson refers to this source as evidence that, rather than following visual templates, the Franks Casket's designer projects scenes that he imagines from written stories: "The artistic conventions are wholly, and consistently, Insular. [...] The inspiration of the artist here might therefore be understood as literary. He made up his imagery out of his flourishing many-stranded native traditions, on the basis of a text or texts which he has read" (Henderson 1999: 107). Carol Neuman de Vegvar (1999: 256) refers to Virgil when she points out some "iconographic anomalies" of the Franks Casket scene in her study of the She-wolf and twins on early medieval English artefacts. The anomaly she finds most significant is that this scene is presented as a discovery, whereas in most medieval representations, the famous Roman She-wolf stands firmly above two reaching infants. Such artefacts as the ubiquitous 'Roma' coins display the familiar design of the standing wolf (see Figure 9), proving that this image with babies was widely known, but the twins on the casket, she says, are "young adults [...] sprawling on the ground beside a recumbent wolf" (1999: 256). She identifies the second wolf in the illustration as yet another anomaly (1999: 260) and finally observes that, in the Franks Casket scene, the wolf and twins lie in a leafy encircling bower instead of within the traditional cave: "The cave is missing in the image but the foliage arches suggestively above the wolf and twins" (1999: 261). These four details in combination with others suggest to Neuman de Vegvar a link "to classical texts available in 8th-century England". She continues: "One of these is Virgil's *Aeneid,* known to Bede and his contemporaries either in its entirety or in excerpts.

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13 The historian Richard Abels (2009: 553, fn. 13) relegates the Virgilian source of this scene to a footnote as something incidental, while Katherine Cross (2015: 11) gives a slightly more substantial nod to the Virgil identification in a discussion of the She-wolf image on coins.

14 'Roma' coins and related artefacts are the likely source of the scene's appearance on several early medieval English artefacts: the Larling plaque, a gold bracteate, and some coins; for photographs and discussion, see Neuman de Vegvar (1999: 257–259).

In Book 8, Virgil describes the imagery on the shield given by Venus to Aeneas. Here, the wolf was portrayed 'crouched after the birth in the green cave of Mars'" (1999: 261).

Neuman de Vegvar then mulls over the problems that "neither classical visual models nor antique texts can explain the second wolf, the large number of reverent spear-carrying shepherds, or the adult twins on the Franks Casket" (1999: 262). The Franks Casket picture is, however, as nearly an exact illustration of Virgil's imagined scene in *Aeneid* 8.634 as could be displayed graphically, and attention to this passage explains all three of the details that Neuman de Vegvar sees as problems. When Virgil says that the mother wolf in the picture on Aeneas's shield *mulcere alternos et corpora fingere lingua* 'caresses each [twin] alternatively and shapes their bodies with her tongue', this single line implying movement back and forth is the reason for a second wolf in the picture; the tongues of two wolves are needed for attention to each of the two boys in a motionless graphic scene. The illustration does more than respond creatively to a scene described with motion, however. It shows the casket's designer visualising a scene that Virgil has *imagined* on the Shield of Aeneas.[15]
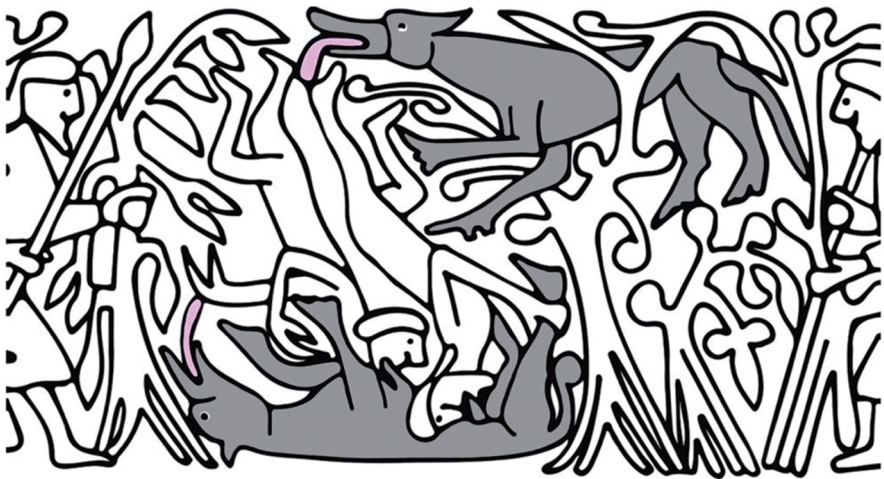
Figure 6: The central image on the casket's left side shows two wolves, each licking a twin with their tongue; the recumbent She-wolf licks one twin's hand and the other wolf licks the second twin's foot. As noted above, pairing is thematic in this scene of the famous twins, with paired warriors coming upon the twins from either side. Drawing: Melissa X. Stevens. Used by permission.

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15 Here, Virgil is similarly taking inspiration not from an actual object but from his predecessor Homer's description of the Shield of Achilles, likewise a pseudo-ekphrasis since there is no actual shield belonging to this imaginary hero (see the discussion by Gransden 2008: 161–163). Of course, Homer himself may have taken inspiration from an actual illustrated shield.

As mentioned above, the most striking difference from the Roma wolf motif as it appears on coins is the Virgilian She-wolf's position: instead of stiffly standing upright above the twins as in the traditional image of this scene found on coins, here she lies *procubuisse* (as in *Aeneid* 8.631): 'recumbent' and comfortably 'stretched out'. Instead of the stony cave associated with this scene (representing an actual cave in Rome), she makes her den in a 'green cave', a thicket. Instead of being discovered by shepherds with shepherds' hooks, it is spear-bearing warriors who have come upon the scene of the twin children of Mars in this cave of Mars. Finally, there are the naked boys themselves; this is a thematic feature on the casket that may have a meaning never to be revealed. Naked boys like these twins (neither babies nor adults) are all over the place: above and below the disk on the lid, dead below Weland's forge, and clambering over the roof of the Temple of Jerusalem on the Titus panel on the back. The main point made in this section, however, is the close attention that the casket's designer is giving to a vividly described passage in a well-known Latin text and the enterprise with which he adapts it to his medium.

In what follows we will see the designer adapting passages from another Latin text for a different purpose. Orosius's *Historiarum Adversum Paganos Libri VII* (henceforth abbreviated *Historiarum*) was available in the casket's eighth-century Northumbria; Bede used it extensively as a source.[16] "A wide distribution of manuscripts testifies to the popularity of the *Historia* within the early medieval period", says A. H. Merrills (2005: 35), "and Orosian themes may be traced within a multitude of later compositions in a variety of genres". The themes on the Franks Casket must

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16 According to Jocelyn N. Hillgarth (1992: 167), "Aldhelm (d. 709) found Orosius useful on occasion as a quarry for unusual terms. But it is Bede whose writings contain the greatest number of references to Orosius in the Early Middle Ages. [...] From the *De temporibus* of 703 (where Bede uses Books II and VII), through the biblical commentaries to the *Chronica maiora*, c. 66 (the *De temporum ratione*) of 725 and the *Historia ecclesiastica* of 731, we find constant use of Orosius". "Book VII [of Orosius] is a main source for Book I of the *Historia* (here Bede definitely prefers Orosius to Gildas) and for the *De temporum ratione*" (Hillgarth 1992: 168). Katherine Cross (2015) may be the only scholar before now to mention Orosius in connection with the Franks Casket (see fn. 4 above), and she goes so far as to suggest a "sequence in the three Mediterranean scenes going from the Christ Child on the front, to Romulus and Remus on the left side, to the destruction of the Temple on the back" (a different sequence is proposed below). She says: "The foundation of Rome [the Romulus and Remus story] took on greater significance in a view of history which saw Rome's rise to power as ordained by God, in order that Christianity should spread throughout the Empire. Such a view was propagated by Orosius [...], and Bede further explicated this interpretation of history" (Cross 2015: 14). Orosius appears again in her discussion of the back panel: "Orosius described Vespasian and Titus celebrating 'as a father and a son riding in the same triumphal chariot, bringing home their glorious victory over those who opposed the Father and Son'" (2015: 19, citing Orosius's *Historiarum* 7.9). This triumphal attitude seems to correspond to that of the casket's designer toward Titus's destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem.

be their most unusual appearance of all. Sections 3 and 4 that follow display the casket's designer borrowing and adapting brief passages from near the beginnings of the first and second books of Orosius's *Historiarum*. Like the pseudo-ekphrastic passage from Virgil, these are inviting passages that could be excerpted and assigned as texts for teaching Latin; thus, their presence (or allusions to them) on the casket need not reflect a deeply learned understanding of the text from which they are derived on the part of either the designer or his audience. The first Orosian passage discussed below stands out for the way it can be expressed graphically.

3 Orosius as Inspiration for the Plan of the Franks Casket

The text for this section is from the first book of Orosius's *Historiarum Adversus Paganos*.

> Maiores nostri orbem totius terrae, oceani limbo circumsaeptum, triquadrum statuere eiusque tres partes Asiam Europam et Africam uocauerunt, quamuis aliqui duas hoc est Asiam ac deinde Africam in Europam accipiendam putarint. (*Historiarum* 1.2.1)[17]

> Our elders divided the world, which is surrounded on its periphery by the Ocean, into three blocks. Its three parts they named Asia, Europe, and Africa. Some authorities, however, have considered them to be two, that is, Asia and Africa and Europe, grouping the last two as one continent.

Paulus Orosius (ca. 383–420), most likely a Spaniard,[18] was a younger contemporary of Augustine of Hippo (354–430), who apparently held him in some esteem, having encouraged him to write the *Historiarum*. Augustine also sent Orosius to consult with Jerome in Bethlehem and convey an important letter to him, and he was present at the Synod of Jerusalem in 415. Most relevant to the Franks Casket, however, is the work that Augustine requested Orosius to compose in connection with his own opus, *The City of God*, Orosius's *Historiarum Adversum Paganos Libri VII*. As Lapidge (2006) shows, this book was a staple in the best libraries, and it was judged sufficiently important to be translated – or, more precisely, adapted – into Old English in the late ninth or early tenth century (see Bateley 1980; Godden 2016: xi). Diarmuid

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17 Andrew Smith has made both the text and this translation available together on his Attalus website ("Paulus Orosius: Histories Against the Pagans" n.d.). He has used the text edited by Karl Zangemeister (1889), with some corrections. The translation is his own, adapted from that of I. W. Raymond (1936) and thoroughly revised by himself, with help from the translation by A. T. Fear (2010), which he urges the reader to consult.

18 For the theory of Orosius's Irish birth, see Ó Corráin (2017: 113–134). The consensus remains, however, that Orosius was most likely born in Spain.

Scully claims that Orosius's *Historiarum* "is one of Bede's most important sources for Romano-British history" (2005: par. 1; cp. Lapidge 2006: 221); Bede also makes use of the *Historiarum* throughout *De temporum ratione* and refers to it in other works (see Lapidge 2006: 221). Bede's heavy usage confirms the availability of Orosius's book at Wearmouth-Jarrow in Northumbria in the casket's designer's time. Like Bede for his history, the casket's designer appears to have drawn on the *Historiarum* for a structuring device, but, as in the case of the She-wolf on the shield of Aeneas, he visualises the words on the page and reproduces them graphically: he adopts the implicit Orosian diagram not as narrative art on a single panel but as a design element for the casket as a whole. One wonders when it occurred to this erudite designer to arrange the two sides and back of the box according to the three-continents scheme of the *ecumene*, an ancient descriptive formula repeated from Orosius by Isidore of Seville and followed closely by Bede, who probably draws directly on Isidore (Kendall and Wallis 2010: 102–103).[19] The casket's designer could be drawing from any of these, but the next section suggests that he had access to a manuscript of Orosius, so that was most likely the textual source of his inspiration for the design elements that follow, beginning with his version of what later became the famous 'T-O map', actually a diagram and likely a simple teaching device with a long history.

The earliest known diagram of the verbal three-continents formula is in a twelfth-century manuscript of Isidore's *Etymologiae.* (Medievalists should observe that placement of the continents on the earliest versions of the T-O map roughly corresponds to real-world geography, a correspondence that was not distorted until the map was Christianized around the twelfth to thirteenth century by moving Jerusalem to make that city 'the centre of the world'.) The T-O map below shows how the design of the three continents could be understood as either three separate parts or only two, with Asia being half of the 'world' and Europe and Africa together being the other half. What is interesting here is the way the three continents of the diagram align with the three panels around the sides and back of the casket. The graphic diagram is stationary, but as recent scholars have noted, the casket invites handling: "We sometimes have to pick it up, turn it or our heads upside down, and so forth to make out just what is being said" (Karkov 2017: 37).[20] Accordingly, moving

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19 See Kendall and Wallis's introduction for the speculation that the two earliest extant versions of the T-O map diagram at the bottom of the manuscript H (Hispanica) of Isidore's version of *De natura rerum*, the oldest surviving manuscript of his text, may either have been inspired by Bede's words or inspired him to write them (Kendall and Wallis 2010: 10–12).

20 In their article, significantly titled "Touching the Franks Casket", Jan-Peer Hartmann and Andrew James Johnston (2024) are the most recent scholars to treat the casket as the moveable, tangible object that it is. Leslie Webster (2003, especially 15) discusses how certain early medieval objects invite mov-

on from this static diagram, the next section invites the reader to turn the box around clockwise in the imagination, aided by the second image presented here in Figure 7.
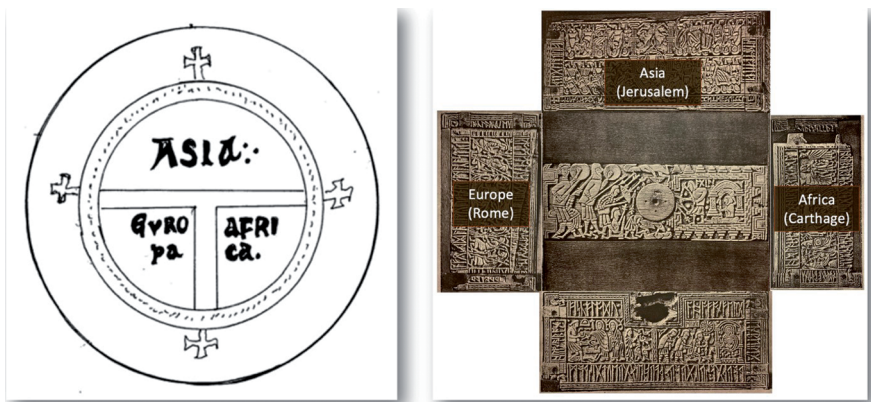

Figure 7: The three-continents diagram as it corresponds to the side and back panels of the Franks Casket. Observe that both images are oriented east. The T-O map drawing on the left is by the author, based on that in the H manuscript of Isidore's *Etymologies*. Melissa X. Stevens has arranged the exploded image of the casket on the right from photographs by Wilhelm Viëtor (1901). Public domain. Combined image used by permission from Melissa X. Stevens.

ing and rotating to reveal changeable meanings as perspective shifts, arguing that this is an element of early medieval English style. In an observation that suggests that the viewer is invited to turn the box in a specific direction to view it, Nicoletta Francovich Onesti (2001: 2) uses the felicitous phrase "un crescendo di artificiosità" to describe the increasing complexity of the scenes and inscriptions proceeding clockwise around the casket, from the single picture on the left side with its clear reference to Rome and a simple prose inscription framing it, to the back with its two registers and two prose sentences, the second naming Jerusalem (further complicated by two languages, Latin and Old English, in two different letter forms, Roman and runic), and then to the three-fold picture on the right side surrounded by a mysterious three-line poem with coded runes and uncertain reference to the pictures or to a city. Britt Mize (2013: 3) uses the adjective "cyclonic", which adds to the idea of crescendo a physical turning, and Thomas Klein (2014: 20) repeatedly uses the adjective "centrifugal", evoking a similar turning motion and thrust. Both metaphors respond to the casket's demand for a hands-on physical relationship to gain access to its meanings (see further Karkov [2017: 37] and Paz [2017: 114]). The impression of a figured object being in motion when handled may occur in different media. Leslie Webster (2012b: 34–35) gives examples of transformations that may be observed in Anglo-Saxon designs on metal when the object is turned and viewed from different angles.

4 The Transfer of Kingdoms Reimagined According to Orosius

> A principio Babylonium et deinde Macedonicum fuit, post etiam Africanum atque in fine Romanum quod usque ad nunc manet. Eademque ineffabili ordinatione per quattuor mundi cardines quattuor regnorum principatus distinctis gradibus eminentes, ut Babylonium regnum ab oriente, a meridie Carthaginiense, a septentrione Macedonicum, ab occidente Romanum. (*Historiarum* 2.1.4–5)

> In the beginning there was the Babylonian kingdom, then the Macedonian, later the African, and finally the Roman, which endures even unto our own day. By the same inscrutable plan, four main kingdoms were preeminent in successive stages at the four cardinal points of the world, namely, the Babylonian kingdom in the East, the Carthaginian in the South, the Macedonian in the North, and the Roman in the West.

Translatio imperii (the 'transfer of rule') is a well-known concept of antiquity meant to explain the way empires follow one another. It probably precedes the biblical scene often associated with it, where the wise man Daniel interprets Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a huge statue. The statue's head of gold represents his kingdom of Babylon and the descending parts of its body in different materials represent succeeding kingdoms: "And after thee shall arise another kingdom inferior to thee, and another third kingdom of brass, which shall bear rule over all the earth" (Daniel 2:39).[21] Traditionally, the succeeding kingdoms after the Babylonian are the Medo-Persian, Greek, and Roman, but in one of his "defining and definitive acts" (García Fernández 2005: 287), Orosius alters this four-kingdom sequence by fusing the Medo-Persian and Greek kingdoms into one and inserting Carthage as a fourth kingdom, thereby creating the sequence Babylonia, Macedonia, Carthage, and Pagan Rome.[22] When Rome becomes Christian, this fifth empire is the final empire that will last forever.

It may be useful to imagine here how the casket's designer appears to appropriate and reformulate Orosius's unique transfer-of-kingdoms idea to support his own purpose and align it with the layout of his box. He might have first toyed with the three-continents idea, easily available in the conclusion of Bede's *De natura rerum* ('On the Nature of Things'). When describing the known inhabited world centred on the Mediterranean, Bede imagines someone (himself) entering that

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21 King James Version; all versions of this passage are similar, some translating 'bronze' instead of 'brass'. Aldhelm cites Daniel 2:31–45 but interprets it sexually rather than as a succession of kingdoms (Dempsey 2015: 128). For the reception history of the 'Four Kingdoms schema', see Breed (2021: 300–328).

22 The "defining" addition of Carthage to the Four Empires Theory was also a personal act, as Orosius was probably living in Carthage or nearby when Augustine urged him to write his innovative history. Orosius mentions that invitation at the beginning of his preface to the *Historiarum.*

world at the Straits of Gibraltar. From that perspective, "Africa is on the right and Europe is on the left. Asia is between them" (Kendall and Wallis 2010: 102). With the straits located in the west, this bodily rather than geographical description places Europe in the North, Asia in the East, and Africa in the South. It is easy to see the casket's designer moving his plan for the box this way and that to align it with Bede's description. Then, thinking of the *translatio imperii* of Orosius, who is the only Late Antique historian to include Carthage in the sequence, the designer might have been pleased to find a respected source encouraging his plan, and even adding the cardinal directions. Turning around his box, either with actual 'touch' or in his mind, he might have proceeded to consider the succession of these kingdoms as a sort of *periplus,* mapping a port-to-port journey around the back of the casket: Rome in the North on the left side, Jerusalem in the East on the back, then the expectation of Africa and Carthage at the South, aligning the panels with Bede's description. Carthage is not named on the Franks Casket, but dates associated with these three cities and their kingdoms add another 'Orosian' dimension to the casket's design.

5 Engaging Bede to Discover a Temporal Arc of Kingdoms

The three texts for this section are from Orosius, *Historiarum* 2.1.6 and 7.2.9, and from Bede's *Chronica maiora* ('Greater Chronicle') under the year 4649.

> Inter primum ac nouissimum, id est inter Babylonium et Romanum, quasi inter patrem senem ac filium paruum, Africanum ac Macedonicum breuia et media, quasi tutor curatorque uenerunt potestate temporis non iure hereditatis admissi, quod utrum ita sit, apertissime expedire curabo. (*Historiarum* 2.1.6)

> Between the first and the last, that is, between the Babylonian and the Roman, bridging as it were the space of years between an aged father and his little son, there intervened the brief period of supremacy of the African and Macedonian empires, circumstances rather than the law of inheritance determining their role as guardians and trustees.

> Regnum Carthaginiense a conditione usque ad euersionem eius, Paulo amplius quam septingentis annis stetit, aeque regnum Macedonicum a Carano usque ad Persen Paulo minus quam septigentis; utrumque tamen septenarius ille numerous, quod iudicantur omnia, termi-nauit. (*Historiarum* 7.2.9)

> The Carthaginian Empire, from its founding to her overthrow, lasted a little more than seven hundred years; the Macedonian, from Caranus to Perseus, a little less than seven hundred. Both, however, came to an end in the number seven, by which all things are decided.

> Iustinianus minor filius Constantini an. X. Hic constituit pacem cum Sarracenis decennio terra marique. Sed et provincia Africa subiugata est Romano imperio, quae fuerat tenta a Sarracensis, ipsa quoque Carthagine ab eis capta et destructa. (*Chronica maiora* 4649)

> Justinian the Second, the son of Constantine, [ruled for] ten years. He made a ten-year peace on land and at sea with the Arabs, but the province of Africa that was subject to the Roman empire was assaulted by the Arabs, and Carthage itself was also captured by them and destroyed.[23]

When the designer was considering how one kingdom followed another around the back of his casket, it might have occurred to him that the date associated with Titus in Jerusalem (70 CE) could be used as a pivot to devise a temporal *translatio imperii* sequence like that suggested by Orosius. In connection with this sequence, the designer might have thought that the casket sequence might also evoke the traditional 'Ages of Man' concept (see Burrow 1988), improving the Orosian scheme by moving from 'birth' with the foundation of Rome to high manhood with the Roman repossession of Jerusalem in 70 CE and then to 'death' with the fall of Carthage. Unfortunately, he would probably have dismissed this idea at once, because the traditional date of Rome's famous capture and destruction of Carthage ('Carthago delenda est') is 146 BCE. The designer might then have recalled, however, or even found out as he continued to think about his project, that Bede was in possession of new information that could save this arc of kingdoms idea. In his *Greater Chronicle* of 725, Bede lists a *second* fall of Carthage, the conquest of the city by the 'Saracens' (Muslims) in 698. Bede did not know about this conquest when writing the earlier version of his chronicle for his students in 703 (McClure and Collins 2008: xxviii).

The addition of this 'new' historical information creates a neatly chronological sequence of kingdoms that now proceeds in a temporal arc mimicking the rise-and-fall pattern of a human life, much as observed by Orosius. That arc of time can be read like this, moving clockwise around the back of the casket: Rome is founded in 753 BCE (the traditional date); Titus conquers Jerusalem in 70 CE; and Carthage falls to the Muslims in 698. The designer must have been delighted to be able to construct this implicit birth-to-death sequence with the more or less 700-year intervals that Orosius gives to his more ancient kingdoms (see Orosius 7.2.9 above). This fortuitous temporal arc, a third Orosian device supplemented by Bede, seems to point, again, to Carthage. With this in mind, we can now return to Virgil for a final signpost, iconographic rather than textual, but aided by a particularly vivid and famous text near the beginning of the *Aeneid.*

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23 Bede's *Chronica maiora* is quoted by year from Jones et al. (1975–1980: II, Latin text) and McClure and Collins (2008, translation).

6 Group-Symbolic Animals on the Casket: The Horse in the Grove

The horse coming through a wood on the right-hand side of the casket is thematically paired with Virgil's recumbent Roman wolf on the opposing left-hand side. This section proposes that the horse also derives from Virgil, though indirectly, and also represents a city. First, I will show that the animals (wolf and horse) are iconographically significant, even though the designer probably never saw them displayed visually. Discussion then follows about how the designer reimagines the head of the sacrificed horse found by Dido in a grove to invent a *living* (spirit) horse emerging from a wood. The text for this section is *Aeneid* 1.441–447.

> Lucus in urbe fuit media laetissimus umbrae
> quo primum lactate undis et turbine Poeni
> Effodere loco signum, quod regia Iuno
> monstrarat *caput acris equi* sic nam fore bello
> egregiam et facile uictu per saecula gentem.
> Hic templum Iunoi ingens Sidonia Dido
> condebat, donis opulentum et numine diuae. (*Aeneid* 1.441–447; my emphasis)

> There was a wooded grove which gave abundant shade in the middle of the city. When first the Phoenicians had been driven there by wind and wave, Juno, the Queen of the Gods, had led them to this spot where they had dug up *the head of a spirited stallion*. This was a sign that from generation to generation they would be a race glorious in war and would have no difficulty in finding fields to graze. Here Sidonian Dido was building for Juno a huge temple rich with offerings and rich, too, with the presence of the goddess.

Animals must have served as 'large-group symbols' as long as humans have gathered in large groups. Within historical times up to today, representative animals have been used to identify nations and ethnicities, both to glorify and to denigrate, depending on the source (see Volkan 2016). During the Punic Wars (264–146 BCE), Carthage issued coins in defiance of Rome, opposing their identifying Horse to the Roman She-wolf coins.[24] The Franks Casket's designer similarly adopts traditional representative animals, She-wolf and horse, and sets them in opposition. Just as the She-wolf evokes Rome on the Franks Casket's left side, the horse on the right-side panel may be understood as representing Carthage, though not the victorious Car-

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24 Coins were issued in Carthage that were clearly based on, and probably intended to challenge, the Roman She-wolf coins, although the image of the horse's head appears on coins long before the era of the Punic wars. Several Punic coin issues show Tanit/Dido or a hero on the obverse and an elegant horse on the reverse, just as the Roman coins have Roma or a ruler on the obverse and the She-wolf on the reverse. Centuries later, a Vandal ruler of Carthage, possibly the famous looter of Rome, Gaeseric, issued coinage with the same confrontational imagery. For a full discussion, see Clover (1989: 129–169).

thage depicted upon ancient coins. Instead, the designer draws on the passage from the *Aeneid* given above while inverting its meaning. The animals on the two side panels of the Franks Casket evoke Rome's birth on the left side and Carthage's demise on the right side, pairing the Roman She-wolf in her thicket with a horse emerging from the woods in a way that suggests the Carthaginian horse discovered by Dido in the wooded grove. Although the casket's designer may have invented this Carthaginian horse-Roman wolf pairing based on texts alone, these two animals are proudly represented on the reverse (back) of each city's major coins.

Of the three coins below, Figure 8 shows the head of the goddess Tanit, the primary deity of Carthage, on the obverse (the front or 'head' side) and the head of a horse on the reverse (the back of the coin). This coin type of goddess plus horse had become standard by the third century BCE and endured until the Fall of Carthage. Figure 9 is a Roman coin featuring the bust of a helmeted goddess Roma on the obverse and the She-wolf and twins in their standard stiff pose on the reverse, and Figure 10 is another coin of Carthage with Tanit on the obverse and the figure of a standing horse on the reverse.[25] Although the fully depicted stallion appears on the coin in Figure 10, Virgil may have been influenced in his description of Dido's discovery of the stallion's *head* by coins like that in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Carthaginian bronze coin of ca. 300–264 BCE with the wreathed head of the goddess Tanit on the obverse and the head of a horse on the reverse. SNG Copenhagen 144. Ex EidMar auction 17, lot 88, June 2025. With permission of Dane Kurth, wildwinds.com. <https://www.wildwinds.com/coins/greece/zeugitana/carthage/i.html> [accessed 10 September 2025].

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25 This was a standard arrangement. On what may be the most famous coin of ancient Greece, a helmeted Athena appears on the obverse with her attribute, the owl, on the reverse.

The Roman and Carthaginian coin types in Figures 9 and 10 serve as elegant numismatic representations of the two animals that appear on the left-hand and right-hand sides of the Franks Casket, respectively.

Figure 9: Roman bronze coin of 330–333 CE with the helmeted head of Roma on the obverse and the she-wolf nurturing Romulus and Remus on the reverse. Struck in Siscia. RIC VII Siscia 240. Ex EidMar auction 14, lot 318, May 2025. With permission of Dane Kurth, wildwinds.com. <https://www.wildwinds.com/coins/ric/city_commemoratives/i.html> [accessed 10 September 2025].

Figure 10: Carthaginian electrum shekel or stater of ca. 350–320 BCE with the wreathed head of Tanit on the obverse and a horse standing right on the reverse. Jenkins-Lewis, Group III; CNP 1.5h; MAA 4. From the Matthew Curtis Collection. Ex Giessener Münzhandlung 46, lot 445, October 1989. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Carthage,_c.350-320_BC,_Stater.jpg> [accessed 3 September 2025]. Permission: CC BY-SA 2.5.

The designer's emerging recognition of these animals' symbolic potential might have gone something like this: once having considered basing the casket's three panels around the back on the three-continent *ecumene*, beginning with Rome in Europe, he may have thought of adapting Virgil's two memorable passages about the She-wolf and the exhumed head of a horse to represent the two cities, Rome and Carthage, facing across the casket with Titus in Jerusalem interposed on the back, thereby basing the scenes on all three panels on memorable passages from locally available Latin texts (or from an anthology of excerpted passages). Then his discovery of Bede's *Greater Chronicle* entry about the near-contemporary second destruction of Carthage may have inspired a far more elaborate and interesting scheme for his evolving puzzle. Continuing to draw on Virgil's good omen of a sacrificed horse marking the site where Juno's temple was to be built, he adapted that image of the beginning of Carthage to portray its ending.[26]

In the brief speculative section that follows, the thematic pairing of the two sides is reexamined with the idea that the figure inside the mound of the central scene on the right-hand side panel might represent the goddess of Carthage, Dido/Tanit of the coinage, or might even be an allegorical 'Felix Cartago', hunched-over, shrouded, and no longer *felix.* (Compare Virgil's *infelix Dido* at *Aeneid* 4.450.)

7 The Possible 'Presence of the Goddess': A Final Speculation

The text for this section is *Aeneid* 1.446–447 (repeated from above), with reference also to Book 6 of the *Aeneid.*

> Hic templum Iunoi ingens Sidonia Dido
> condebat, donis opulentum et numine diuae. (*Aeneid* 1.446–447)

> Here Sidonian Dido was building for Juno a huge temple rich with offerings and rich, too, with the presence of the goddess.

Many years ago, first Karl Hauck (1968), then Hilda R. Ellis Davidson (1969: 222–223), suggested that the casket's designer might have intended the figure inside the

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26 While embedding suggestive images in that scene, the designer avoids overtly naming the city on the casket's right-hand side. Seeking the name 'Carthage', or 'Cartago', as it is spelled on some maps, may send the engaged reader down a rabbit hole of speculation and manipulation of texts. The only word on the casket that might produce an element of an invented compound sounding at all similar to Carthage/Cartago is *teag,* embedded in line two of the poem, a word signifying some kind of enclosed space, as in *mearteage,* a corral for horses, and *bearmteage,* a casket to be carried on one's chest, perhaps a small box like the Franks Casket itself. But even if one were to grasp at that interesting straw, where is the initial *car-* element to go with it?

arched structure on the casket's lid to represent a goddess. A more recent and specific proposal is that the figure under the arch "with a triquetra above it, a symbol often symbolising a mystical aspect", might be "the Nike or city-goddess of the place being defended" (Osborn 2024: 57).[27] That profiled seated figure, usually assumed to be female, is presented within the enclosure as a torso rather than a full figure, like the Virgin on the front panel (Cross 2015: 30), which may suggest that these two icon-like figures under arches should be considered together. Her seated position bears some similarity to the 'Goddess Fortuna' or Nike (Victory) figure occasionally found in that posture, especially on coins. The city goddess figure in general "continued to be one of the most prominent and longest enduring symbols of the *polis* in a vast geography from Arabia to Spain for many centuries" (Tahberer 2012: 6), and there exists a widely-distributed coin including such a figure that could perhaps have come to the attention of the casket's designer. The Roman emperor Maxentius (ruled 306–312) was among the many who adopted the city-goddess idea, and he issued coins so abundantly that today they may be found for sale on numismatic sites and even, inexpensively, on eBay. Many of these coins show the head of Maxentius on the obverse and the seated city-goddess Roma on the reverse. Traditional deities portrayed on coins and elsewhere typically hold either an identifying attribute, as a bow identifies Artemis and a hammer identifies Thor, or an object identifying a function, as a cornucopia suggests a goddess associated with abundant crops. 'Felix Cartago' (sometimes Carthago or Kartago) carries sheaves of wheat representing the abundance of this crop that fed Rome. The Maxentius coins show the seated goddess Roma holding a globe signifying the emperor's claim to widespread power (see Figure 11), and a related series displays Maxentius himself stepping over the threshold of the shrine to receive the globe from Roma's extended hand.[28] While it is possible that the Franks Casket's designer came across such a Nike coin showing the seated goddess holding a significant object and liked that idea, he could equally have invented the figure himself as he did so much else. On the casket's lid, where a city needs defence, the figure under the arch "holds an arrow in her hand instead of a staff" (Davidson 1969: 223).

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27 Note that in numismatics the term 'city-goddess' refers specifically to the image on a coin of a female deity wearing a crown that suggests the walls of the city she represents. In this discussion, the term is used more broadly to designate any protective deity associated with a city.

28 Dane Kurth's webpage on wildwinds.com, "Browsing Roman Imperial Coins of Maxentius", contains a list headed by twelve coins with Roma seated in her temple, often with the She-wolf and twins somewhere in the scene. These are followed by five coins featuring figures of women standing with their identifying attributes in hand: four of Cartago herself in a hexastyle temple and one of Africa without a temple. After these, the head of Maxentius continues to appear on the obverse with many different images occurring on the reverse ("Browsing Roman Imperial Coins of Maxentius" n.d.).

Figure 11: Bronze follis of Emperor Maxentius, 306–312 CE, with the laureate head of Maxentius on the obverse and Roma, holding globe and sceptre, seated left in a hexastyle temple, on the reverse. Struck in Aquileia. RIC VI 121a. Ex Münzzentrum Rheinland auction 177, lot 517, Sept. 2016. With permission of Dane Kurth, wildwinds.com. <https://www.wildwinds.com/coins/ric/maxentius/i.html> [accessed 9 September 2025].

If the profiled figure holding an arrow on the casket's lid is understood as an allegorical 'goddess' like Roma on the Maxentius coins, the theme of females of semidivine status under arches may occur in a sequence of three scenes crossing over the casket, a possibly local 'goddess' on the lid, the Virgin Mary on the front panel, and the person in the mound on the right-side panel; all three panels contain triquetrae, the three-looped endless knot that may indicate the presence of a spiritual or ritual element (Osborn and Gunnell 2025). When considered with *Aeneid* 1.447 in mind (*numine diuae*), the "little cooped-up figure", as Napier (1901: 377) calls her, inside the mound marked with Xs,[29] provides a starting point for a potential discovery of Carthage, so recently captured by the Arabs and, according to Bede's *Chronica maiora* (4649), "destroyed".

As indicated above, the figure of a woman representing a city or country was a standard metaphor. Constantine's dream-woman represents Byzantium in Aldhelm's *De virginitate* (Lapidge and Herren 1979: 83–84), Athena of course represents Athens, and Tanit/Dido appears as a goddess personifying the luck of Carthage ('felix Cartago') on many coins. Interpreting the figure in the bare earthen mound

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29 Those Xs mark the mound as a 'grave' by showing how the word in the inscription functions as a label for the mound in the picture above it (Osborn 2024: 53–56).

as an *unhappy* Carthage makes a perfect contrast to the thriving Roman twins in their cave of living plants on the casket's left-hand side, and it also resonates with the woman on the lid in her architectural niche within a city's ramparts. The triquetra above that canopy may be intended to identify it as spiritually significant, like other arched edifices signifying a "microcosmic place of divine presence" (Bogdanovic 2017: 292) and like Juno's temple in *Aeneid* 1.447. The lady on the lid sits tall in her place of power, as opposed to the personified Carthage (if one may tentatively so identify her) who crouches banished within a mound. Having no model to follow for this scene, like Virgil's She-wolf ekphrasis for the left-side panel, the designer had to be inventive, so for this contrasting right-side panel he imagines the sacrificed horse, long ago the harbinger of a new city, becoming now a sad witness to that city's demise. In a reversal of roles, that once-buried horse re-emerges through the sacred grove to look down upon a now-buried Carthage, while what might be a ritual specialist stands waiting nearby with her bitter, biting drink.[30] On the site where they are standing once stood the great temple to honour Juno – a temple that is now only a memory. Is the casket's designer conscious of this shadowy echo of the Temple of Jerusalem on the back, so soon to be destroyed by Titus, or is that an elegant coincidence?

Repurposing earlier works was a common practice expected to be recognised and admired. Catullus's story of Theseus abandoning Ariadne was Virgil's model for Aeneas abandoning Dido (Casali 1995: 6), and Virgil more broadly modelled the *Aeneid* on Homer while reversing Homer's order of events to create his own plot: first the voyage, then the epic battle, as "philologists have long since noted" (Conte 1984: 71). While these two appropriations by Virgil are specific and deliberate, the casket's designer, in addition to possibly using *Aeneid* 1.441–447 for his Carthage panel, seems to evoke a swirl of images from Book 6 of the *Aeneid.* Virgil's story about Aeneas meeting the Sybil and then entering the underworld contains vivid passages suitable for students to memorise. As others have noticed, when visualising Weland's preparation for flight on the casket's front panel, the designer may have been inspired by the lines recollecting Daedalus's winged flight near the beginning of Book 6 of the *Aeneid* (6.14–15).[31] When creating the horse panel, the designer

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30 Although Geoffrey Russom does not discuss the cup marked as a 'biter' on the Franks Casket, his article on the *poculum mortis* in early medieval literature provides a context (Russom 1988: 175–189). Carleton Brown's earlier study focuses on Old English poetry, and in it he asserts, "Wherever this figure of the Cup of Death took its origin, and whatever may have been the date of its first appearance, it certainly was current in Anglo-Saxon England" (Brown 1940: 393).

31 The craftsman Daedalus's winged flight from his captivity by King Minos has occasionally been proposed as a model or at least an analogue for Weland's flight from captivity by King Niðhad (see Bradley 1990: 40 and, with reference to Ovid, Dronke 1997: 265). No one to my knowledge has drawn

may have returned to that Book 6 or to his memory of a series of suggestive scenes in it. The horse-metaphor for the possessed Cumaean Sybil at *Aeneid* 6.77–80 could have suggested the equine-human *herh-os* seer uttering words from elsewhere through the mouth of a symbolic (chthonic) snake; the warrior Aeneas confronting the Sybil is like the casket's warrior confronting the *herh-os*; and even the Sybil at her cavern might have suggested the drink-bearer above the *græf*. Later in Book 6, Aeneas must penetrate a wood to find the golden bough giving access to the other-world (*Aeneid* 6.201–11), and then he must pass through a tree-guarded gate to enter it (*Aeneid* 6.282–85). The way these and other moments early in Book 6 of the *Aeneid* seem to hover behind the panel's pictures suggests images plucked from memory by someone with a visual imagination, intent on building a new story at the threshold between worlds, but a story of loss, not quest.

Was the casket designed for its potential owner as an intellectual quest, perhaps to celebrate achievement in learning Latin by a superior student of high social status?[32] The casket's references to Latin texts remind the author of this article of those British school exams where the student is given snippets of Latin with the instruction to 'identify, translate, and discuss'. This far more elegant box provides a series of snippet-like clues pointing to the mysterious right-hand side with its coded runes, and once this imagined clever and alert reader of the casket has easily identified the obvious allusions to Virgil and Josephus and has recognised the implicit allusions to Orosius in the box's layout and sequences,[33] they should be able to

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attention to the near-ekphrasis of *Aeneid* 6.14–17, followed by the reference to Daedalus carving additional illustrations of stories *in pairs* on the doors of the temple at Cumae.

32 Webster supposes that the box was made for a member of the secular elite (Webster 2012b: 97). Osborn (2024) takes this idea further, emphasizing the interlocked themes of boys and exile on the casket. First she quotes James Campbell: "Exiles are omnipresent in this period, and [...] this necessity would have made some familiarity with Latin, the international auxiliary language of that time, a form of insurance" (Campbell 1986: 94). Osborn continues by commenting that the three stories from Latin sources illustrated on the casket would be "good stories for boys" and that "boys occur visually in one or more scenes on all three of those panels, while others show up proleptically as the story continues beyond what is illustrated" (Osborn 2024: 62–63). Here, she alludes to the idea that the illustration of Weland's child murder interacts with the 'Adoration of the Magi' on the front panel to evoke the 'Massacre of the Innocents', involving more young boys in the viewer's imagination (see the convincing argument by Oehrl 2021). The implication, then, is that this extraordinarily complex riddle may have been designed to stimulate or encourage, or perhaps to reward, an exceptional boy or a group of intelligent boys learning Latin. The date commonly assigned to the casket's construction corresponds well to a time when the generation of young men flocking over to study in Ireland (Lapidge and Herren 1979: 163; Dempsey 2015: 49–55; Ireland 2023: 179–200) had come home to England, some presumably becoming teachers in their own turn.

33 Identifying Orosius would be easier for this imagined Latin-literate reader than for a medievalist, because major monastic libraries of the period appear to have contained his *Historiarum*. Even

provide the 'missing' name of the fallen city to which the Orosian allusions all point, thereby identifying Africa to complete the casket's reference to the three-continents world of the *ecumene*. It must be emphasized, however, that it would be a mistake to claim that Carthage actually appears on the right-hand panel of the casket, because it does not.

To this day, opinions abound about whether the casket's designer wishes to emphasize a pagan, Christian, or secular message. For an example of the pagan/ Christian opposition, Alfred Becker (2021), sticking to an interpretation proposed in his important book of half a century ago (Becker 1973), considers the casket's message pagan and magical, whereas Leslie Webster argues for a Christian emphasis (Webster 1999, 2012a). The present article does not deal directly with ideological interpretations of the six stories depicted on the casket's five panels, but finding passages from Orosius apparently associated with the casket's physical structure underlying these stories, along with the previous discovery of Virgil as a principal source for the subject of the left-side panel, shifts the emphasis of the box away from pagan and Christian concerns toward a high-culture interest in classical themes that suggests an engaged community of which the casket's designer was a part.[34] Although apparently aware of pagan rituals and referring to them when advantageous (see Osborn and Gunnell 2025), that designer might be imagined as wishing for this strange and enigmatic artwork to reflect, through allusion, the complex elegance of what is now termed 'Late Antiquity', a period extending from approximately 250 to 750 CE according to the Oxford Centre for Late Antiquity ["OCLA" n.d.]). Associated with this idea is the occasionally repeated proposal that the label Ægili on the casket's lid may refer to the hero Achilles of the Trojan War, usually suggesting that he comes onto the casket via the *Aeneid* (see, e.g., Souers 1943; Cocco 2009; Hartmann and Johnston 2024; McCulloch 2026). Finding a reference to the Trojans on the lid would make an excellent anchor for the three sides of the casket that refer to a historical (or mytho-historical) succession of kingdoms.

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among modern specialists in the field of Old English literature, however, few know more about Orosius's work than that it contains the often-anthologized voyages of Ohthere and Wulfstan – an insertion of Alfred's day or later (Bately 1980: 316), and that insertion has nothing to do with Orosius himself. For a facing page translation and current discussion of the Old English 'Orosius', see Godden (2016). Godden's editorial title reveals a great deal about this Old English text, which is often referred to as a translation.

34 We can only speculate about the casket's attention to Latin authors, but it accords with an early medieval interest in Latin literature, especially in Virgil and his commentators, that has been increasingly proposed by scholars from Klaeber (1911) to North (2006, especially Chapter 3) and Hartmann and Johnston (2024), among others.

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